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The second Modi government sends a powerful ‘neighbourhood first’ message

In a reaffirmation of New Delhi’s ‘Neighbourhood First’ policy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s first visit abroad is to the Maldives and Sri Lanka, while S. Jaishankar wraps up his first visit abroad as Foreign Minister to Bhutan. Leaders of several neighbouring countries were invited to Mr. Modi’s swearing-in ceremony. This is the first state visit by Mr. Modi to Male, which he had visited briefly for the swearing-in of President Ibu Solih in November 2018. A series of agreements are expected during the visits, including the implementation of an $800 million Line of Credit to the Maldives. The projects include a cricket stadium, water purification and sewerage systems, as well as a Coastal Surveillance Radar System and a Composite Training Centre for the Maldives National Defence Force. This follows the Indian practice of fulfilling the needs of neighbouring countries that they themselves identify, much as it has done in Afghanistan. The Prime Minister’s visit to the Maldives aims to send a three-pronged message: to continue high-level contacts between close neighbours, assist as development partners, and strengthen people-to-people ties. For Sri Lanka, Mr. Modi’s message is one of solidarity in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday terror attacks and the communal violence that followed, as well as a commitment to continue bilateral cooperation on joint development projects agreed to in 2017. He will be the first international leader to visit Colombo since the attacks, and his visit sends a powerful message as Sri Lanka tries to recover from the trauma.

The atmospherics today are in contrast to the comparatively trickier relationship with the previous governments in Male and Colombo during Mr. Modi’s first tenure. In 2015, Mr. Modi had cancelled a visit to Male at the last minute following concerns over then-President Abdulla Yameen’s crackdown on Opposition parties. Similar misgivings had cropped up regarding former Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa’s regime. China’s inroads into the region had formed a common thread straining ties with both countries. India protested when the Yameen government signed a free trade agreement with Beijing, and granted China land for development. It made its displeasure clear over the many infrastructure projects Mr. Rajapaksa granted to Chinese companies under heavy Chinese loans. Deeper concerns arose from the Chinese naval presence in both Male and Colombo. Now, the situation has turned. Governments in both countries have changed. Besides a charm offensive, India has chosen to mute its opposition to their continued cooperation with China on the Belt and Road Initiative. It also comes from a realisation in Delhi that at a time when factors such as the U.S.-China trade tussles and tensions in West Asia pose uncertainties, strong neighbourhood ties can provide much comfort.
Unconscionable switch

The ease with which 12 Congress MLAs have defected to the TRS raises troubling questions

Telangana Assembly Speaker Pocharam Srinivas Reddy’s decision to endorse the merger of a 12-member group of legislators from the Congress with the ruling Telangana Rashtra Samithi may be technically justified under the Tenth Schedule of the Constitution. They constitute the requisite two-thirds of the 18-member Congress Legislature Party. But this orchestrated decimation of the Opposition in the 120-member legislature does not bode well. With this, the TRS’s strength has gone up to 103. It had won 88 seats in the 2018 elections, but three MLAs — an Independent and one each from the Telugu Desam Party and the All India Forward Bloc — defected to its fold recently. These actions seem aimed to reduce the Opposition’s ability to act as a check. Defections are not uncommon despite the stringent conditions of the anti-defection law. But coming so soon after the Assembly elections, and devoid of a point of principle, they raise disturbing questions about the ideological and programmatic cohesiveness of the Congress. MLAs need not be tied to party satraps and should assert their individuality in law-making — but it is dishonesty to switch sides after being elected on a party ticket when the only plausible objective is to grab the loaves of power. That there is no ideological distinctiveness to political representation in States such as Telangana has made it possible for defections to happen rampantly. In an ideology-lite polity, the MLAs seem to see no benefit in meaningfully representing their constituents, and find it rewarding to align with the ruling party for the purposes of patronage.

The anti-defection law, that calls for disqualification unless defecting legislators are part of a group that constitutes at least two-thirds of the legislative strength of a party and that merges with another party, was enacted to prevent such machinations. However, defectors have found ways to work around the law to avoid disqualification. Dramatic shifts in allegiances by elected MLAs have been a concern in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, among other States. In many cases, even if the two-thirds rule has been flouted, the authority given to the Speaker, who is invariably from the ruling dispensation, has enabled dubious calls. This decision-making structure has also allowed blatant defections to be ignored, as seen in Goa and Manipur, among other States. In such cases, the Speaker has acted less as a constitutional authority and more as a partisan party loyalist. It is time to reconsider the anti-defection law’s procedural implementation and to vest the power on decisions over mergers of groups and disqualifications of legislators with an institution such as the Election Commission. This could well bring about a more strict and objective implementation of the anti-defection law.
The great Indian celebration

The country’s politics has changed, and new analytical tools are required to understand it

The American sociologist, C. Wright Mills, known for classic works like The Power Elite, dubbed the years of the Dwight D. Eisenhower presidency (1953-61) as the great celebration. The United States was celebrating its sense of dominance even as the Cold War and the McCarthy era were gnawing its entrails. Something of the hypocrisy and the complacency of the time haunts the India of today. We seem to belong to the future, yet the more outdated we become as a country. The Narendra Modi government seems to celebrate a series of ironic events as a great victory. The very scale of its electoral score and the puniness of the Opposition seem to have unhinged it.

Lost pluralism

We celebrate democracy at the very moment that our majoritarianism has destroyed our sense of pluralism. The dissenting, the marginal, the minority seem to have no place in the juggernaut rolling before us.

We are hailing a nation state where ideas march in uniform, where the jingoism of the masses is labelled as patriotism.

We hail an alliance between corporate power and the nation state dubbed as development without realising that such a theory of growth has no ethical space for the idea of the Anthropocene. We have confined the challenge of climate change to the dustbin of dissent, indifferent to the vulnerability of our tribals or of our coastlines. Our piety as a Third World nation state has emptied our ethics as a civilisation. The emptiness of our Swadeshism has destroyed the creativity of our Swaraj, our ability to see locality and planet as one whole.

We pretend that we are in pursuit of a knowledge economy, when our sense of knowledge has lost meaning as a culture and become totally instrumental. At the very moment we are being outthought and outfought by the West and by China, we claim a priority for our ancient civilisation as a knowledge economy. We have a regime which is committed to an ancient past, but is clueless about the problems it confronts in the future.

Yet the drum beat of this election has made us think that India has arrived on the world stage. It is a piece of news our intellectuals are afraid to challenge lest they be seen as anti-national. The question is, how do we challenge such a situation when we celebrate the very things that are driving us to the world of mediocrity?

The general tom-tomming that the Congress has been put in its place, that liberalism is dead, that Marxism is as stale as yesterday’s newspaper makes one feel that India was suffering from a deep sense of inferiority. We saw ourselves as victims of history. Where else would politicians spend time rewriting the Battle of Haldighati as if a victory then was more critical than any battle in the future. India today feels as if it has won a victory.
against the Nehruvian model that had haunted it. We feel that we have exorcised ourselves and this victory is the psychological beginning to a new India. It is this psychological state that we need to understand. We seem to think that we have outgrown our past illusions. The electoral score is literally presented as a catharsis, a purging of the past where a renaissance India emerges ready for a global future. An India tired of being a failure.

Reading the popular mind

We face the irony not that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Bharatiya Janata Party president Amit Shah were successful psephologists, but that they were such brilliant readers of the contemporary Indian mind. For all our talk of our great nationalism movements, our sense of civilisation, Mr. Modi realised the sense of puniness that haunted our minds. The Congress of Sardar Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi was too arrogant to think of such a state. It could have thought of the poverty of the peasant, but not the poverty of philosophy, the little mindsets that haunted us. It is true we were aspirational, yet our sense of being aspirational hid our self doubts.

This election has created a new mindset, whereby we look confident having acquired the feathers, the plumage of those who conquered us. Before one reacts in ire, remember no regime has been more colonial than the present. It is as if the whole country was waiting for a few certificates from the advanced nations. India has dressed itself in the plumage of nationalism, development and science, pretending that this millenarian arrival was India’s first step to the future. In an ironic way India became Modi and Modi became India. We have transformed ourselves into a mimic nation.

Let us face it. The ideas of our elite, our liberals, our Marxists, our celebrations of the plural and civilisational had no sense of those who felt left out. The latter felt they had not joined history, that the bandwagon of the nation state, development had taken them nowhere. Mr. Modi realised the sense of loss and resentment, the need for recognition. It was a cultural envy, a bit like his attempt to take the place next to Gandhi in the KVIC (Khadi and Village Industries Commission) calendar. This sense of being left out haunted us as a nation. Mr. Modi harnessed this envy, found the right epidemic of hate and legitimised it. The Other had to be recreated and defeated, and 2002 became the myth for that inauguration. Riot or mob lynching became a moment of history. Every rioter felt he was conquering history. Violence became the rite of passage by which we recovered our lost sense of masculinity.

But recovering masculinity is not enough. It needs a framework of legitimation and communalism expanded into patriotism. Majoritarianism became the new nationalism.

The electoral analyses presented are antiseptic, almost rituals of avoiding analysis. There is a banal sociology which either shows that political parties did not matter or a hosanna to leadership. It fails to confront the collective psyche or the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) ability to convert folk psychology into mass psychology. Attempts to read it like a chartered accountant reading election counts is irrelevant. It was like watching an epidemic or an avalanche. The RSS had a deeper sense of the resentment that was local
to India, and it sublimated this violence to the Other with the right categories such as nation, security and patriotism. It understood the power of the irrational and harnessed it. Mr. Shah’s sociology of the nukkad had more creative power than the official sociology textbooks. As defeated activists and scholars, we can watch it voyeuristically, sense an India we need to understand.

There is space

Now Mr. Modi is Lutyens’ Delhi, and we need to understand the consequence of it. We need a different set of insights to critique him. The challenge of the future will lie in our ability to invent a different democracy, and not get caught in the banality of policy critique or a critique of choices, where law and order displaces democratic inventiveness. Our idea of India is still hospitable to impossible possibilities.

The spirit of 1989, from Tiananmen to Prague

It is a reminder that where non-violence is practised, democracy is honoured

The recent commemoration of the 30th anniversary of the violent suppression of China’s Tiananmen Square protests is a good occasion to look back on the year 1989 and the non-violent movements for democracy which changed our world. It is a fact that the non-violent movements in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 ended the confrontation between East and West and strengthened the possibility of a “new international order” based on the extension of democracy around the globe. As a result of the victory of non-violent campaigns in Poland (with the Solidarity movement) and in Czechoslovakia (with the Velvet Revolution), the technique of non-violent transformation of authoritarian and semi-totalitarian regimes into liberal democracies turned into a global cross-cultural phenomenon.

In other words, the self-empowerment strategies of non-violent civic actors of 1989 had a great impact on those around the globe who believed in a genuine process of democratisation. Let us not forget that the past 30 years have witnessed an unprecedented flowering of non-violent experiences. In many areas of the world, such as Latin America, North Africa and West Asia, where armed struggle was once seen as the only path to freedom, non-violent campaigns are now considered institutionalised methods of struggle for democratic invention and democratic governance.

Good governance
One of the important tasks that was set by the non-violent movements of 1989 was the provision of “good governance”. For these movements and their leaders like Czechoslovakia’s Václav Havel, the real test of democracy was not only in the peaceful process of transition, but also in the non-violent consolidation of democratic institutions. For the advocates of non-violence in 1989, democracy was not just “an institutional arrangement for organising the political society” but a new attitude and approach towards the problem of power. For example, from the point of view of a 1989 leader such as Havel, the concept of power should go hand in hand with responsibility. As he pointed out, “Politics is an area of human endeavour that places greater stress on moral sensitivity, on the ability to reflect critically on oneself, on genuine responsibility, on taste and tact, on the capacity to empathise with others, on a sense of moderation, on humility.”

In a Gandhian manner, the spirit of 1989 affirmed that the challenges and difficulties of democratic governance needed to be confronted through self-rule, self-control and the soul force. Undoubtedly, for all the non-violent actors of 1989, the twin practices of self-discipline and empathetic service seemed necessary in order to control an unjust and inappropriate power.

This is actually what was suggested by the student-led democracy movement in China. For the Chinese students, the process of democratisation was a way to change the Communist power over society into a power from within it. As another leader of the 1989 movements, Adam Michnik, declares, “The real struggle for us is for the citizen to cease to be the property of the state.”

Truly, civic actors and freedom animators such as Adam Michnik and Václav Havel did not learn to love democracy and non-violence blindfolded and with their heads lowered. They believed that democracy can be practised only when we can look at it clearly and critically. Accordingly, it was in their minds that the Berlin Wall began to crumble. As the spirit of 1989 dawned in Beijing, the Polish people, and the Czechs, Slovaks, Romanians, Hungarians, Lithuanians, Estonians, Ukrainians and Russians came to understand that the empowerment of civil society and the collective ability to rule democratically were the essential constituents of non-violent transition to democracy.

Ironically, on the same day (June 4, 1989) that the Polish Communists were defeated for the first time in elections in a Communist state, the Chinese pro-democracy movement was crushed by the tanks in Tiananmen Square. Paradoxically, both Communist China and post-Communist Poland turned to market economy and a wild rush for wealth. But the lesson of 1989 remained intact and more relevant than ever.

**It’s still afloat**

As a matter of fact, it took shape once again in the spirit of young Egyptians and Tunisians who shook Arab history though the tactics of non-violent resistance. Certainly, the spirit of 1989 was non-violence in the making. And today, we can find the same spirit of 1989, what we can call a Gandhian moment of history, in Algeria, Sudan, Iran, Indonesia, the U.S. and many other countries around the globe. It shows that the dream of 1989 which accompanied the Chinese students of Tiananmen, the workers of Poland and the civic
actors of Prague is not over. It shows that where non-violence is practised, democracy is honoured. Moreover, the spirit of 1989, which took shape in the year of all freedoms, is a reminder that democracy is a system based on trust in human action and the fact that the impossible could become possible.